

The Community VOICE

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Native plants for streamside and backyard gardens

By Walter Earle February 2, 2012 11:53 am



Many of our landscapes are traversed by riparian (stream-side) corridors. Some of these are seasonal in flow while others are perennial, or year-round streams. These areas are incredibly important to the health of our local environments. Whether these streams are in urban, suburban, or rural areas, makes no difference. Streams and their corridors provide numerous benefits.

First and foremost is the waterway itself. As we all know, it is the home of numerous species of fish and amphibians. Lesser

known are the wealth of insect species that thrive in a healthy aquatic environment. These are often the indicator organisms of a clean and vibrant waterway. The health of the fauna component, or animal life, is often dependent on a diverse riparian flora, or plant life.

Riparian areas are also important as wildlife corridors. This is particularly true in urban and suburban areas where the migration of animals is often limited to only these areas. Appropriate native plant species provide numerous benefits to the resident and migratory species. Nesting habitat for birds, food in the form of berries and seeds for mammals and birds, habitat for insects and the food source of fish and amphibians are among the many benefits provided by the native plants.

One issue facing riparian corridors is escaped exotics. These are species, or in this case, plants, that have been introduced from other regions or countries. They often exhibit aggressive growing habits, either spreading by seed or vegetative by shoots or runners. Some may say they still provide valuable habitat, such as shade and soil stabilization. The problem is they sometimes out-compete more appropriate species and can even become mono-crops – a single, dominant species - thus losing the important diversity of the area.

Often these plants have no natural control. The first step in a restoration process is to control some of these plants. Outright removal isn't always recommended as they do prevent soil erosion during high volume flows and floods, so a gradual reduction over a period of years is often the best course.

Many of the plants appropriate for our streams are also useful in our gardens. They provide many of the same benefits such as nesting and food for birds, nectar, pollen and foliage for beneficial insects, and cover for ground nesting bees. Increased natural activity in our gardens also helps to

control those insects we prefer to call “pests.”

Plants suitable for the garden need not be all trees and shrubs. Smaller perennials, grasses and annuals provide year-round interest as well as additional habitat and food. Larger perennial grasses also provide cover and protection for quail.

The presentation on Feb. 9 (see Creek Critters calendar for more details) will start with a brief introduction of the riparian ecosystem followed by a more detailed discussion of some of the plants that are available and useful. A short question and answer period will follow.

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